

From Inner Fortitude to Self-Worth: How Ego Strength Shapes Self-Esteem through Self-Concept Clarity

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ABSTRACT - Ego strength, defined as the capacity to maintain self-regulation and psychological integration under stress, may help shape a coherent sense of self. This study examined whether self-concept clarity (SCC) mediates the association between ego strength and global self-esteem. A sample of 106 undergraduates completed the 18-item Ego Strength Scale, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. All measures demonstrated adequate internal consistency. Ego strength, SCC, and self-esteem were positively correlated. Mediation analyses supported full mediation: ego strength predicted self-esteem through SCC, and the direct effect became nonsignificant once SCC was included. These findings suggest that ego strength contributes to stable self-representations, which in turn foster positive self-evaluations. Results highlight SCC as a key mechanism linking internal regulatory capacities to self-esteem, with implications for developmental, personality, and clinical research.

Keywords:

Self-concept clarity;
Self-esteem; Ego
strength; Personality
resources; Self-
regulation;
Mediational analysis

Introduction

Because a person's capacity to maintain coherence and regulatory control under stress bears on how stable, coherent, and positively evaluative their self-views are, ego strength may be a resource in the architecture of the self (Barron, 1953). Yet empirical work linking ego strength to core self-processes like self-concept clarity and global self-esteem remains scarce. The present

study seeks to bridge that gap by testing whether self-concept clarity mediates the link between ego strength and self-esteem in a sample of undergraduates.

Ego Strength: Concept and Empirical Relevance

Ego strength is a construct articulated in psychodynamic and personality traditions, signifying relative durability in maintaining ego functions (e.g., impulse control, reality testing, emotional balance) under internal or external stress (Barron, 1953; Harmon, 1980). Individuals with greater ego strength are presumed to better integrate, regulate, and sustain coherent self-boundaries, even under challenge. In recent research, the term overlaps with constructs such as psychological resilience, ego resilience, and self-regulation (Block & Block, 1980; Bonanno, 2004).

Given its theoretical emphasis on self-regulatory integrity (Qarachanaq et al., 2015), ego strength may encourage the emergence or maintenance of stable, coherent self-concepts which, in turn, may support a more confident evaluative self (i.e., self-esteem).

Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Esteem

Self-concept clarity (SCC) is defined as the extent to which one's self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable (Campbell et al., 1996). In their foundational work, Campbell et al. (1996) demonstrated that SCC correlates positively with self-esteem, stability of self-descriptions over time, and general well-being, even controlling for personality traits (Campbell et al., 1996). Subsequent work supports that individuals with low self-esteem tend to have less clarity in their self-concepts (Dutton & Brown, 1997).

More recently, longitudinal and multi-wave designs find that SCC is implicated in well-being trajectories (e.g., SCC predicts fluctuations in subjective well-being over time) (Xiang et al., 2023). Thus, SCC is more than a static correlate; it may act as a cognitive scaffolding that supports stable evaluative self-views. Given the robust link between SCC and self-esteem, SCC is a plausible mediator in a broader chain linking foundational resources (like ego strength) to self-evaluative outcomes.

Ego Strength, Self-Concept Clarity Self-Esteem

From a theoretical standpoint, one can envision the following pathway: individuals with higher ego strength are better able to regulate emotion, maintain coherence under stress, and resist fragmentation of self-boundaries (Harmon, 1980). These regulatory advantages may help maintain or develop a self-concept that is more consistent, less conflicted, and more firmly organized (i.e., higher SCC) (Qarachanaq et al., 2015). In turn, a clearer self-structure supports the confident evaluation of the self (i.e., higher self-esteem) (Dutton & Brown, 1997). Empirically, such mediational paths have been found in adjacent literatures: for example, personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, openness) influence well-being in part via SCC (e.g., Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). Although no prior work directly examining a mediation from ego strength to self-esteem via SCC was not located, the logic draws from established structural and self-evaluation literatures.

Because SCC is conceptually and empirically closer to the evaluative self (self-esteem) than is ego strength, partial mediation was expected: that is, ego strength will retain a direct positive

association with self-esteem even after accounting for SCC, but a meaningful portion of the variance in self-esteem accounted for by ego strength will flow indirectly via SCC.

Present Study and Hypotheses

In the current cross-sectional investigation, this study aims to test whether SCC mediates the association between ego strength and self-esteem. The following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Ego strength will correlate positively with SCC.

H2: Ego strength will correlate positively with self-esteem.

H3: SCC will correlate positively with self-esteem.

H4: SCC will partially mediate the relationship between ego strength and self-esteem as demonstrated by a direct significant relationship remaining between ego strength and self-esteem after controlling SCC.

Method

Participants

Participants were 106 students (67 men, 39 women) enrolled in undergraduate social sciences courses, who completed an anonymous online survey. The average age was 19.48 ($SD = 1.79$).

Measures

Ego strength (Es18; Kelly & Daughtry, 2018). The Es18 (Kelly & Daughtry, 2018) is an 18-item True–False short form derived from Barron’s (1953) Ego-Strength Scale. Items index capacities such as reality testing, emotional regulation, and relation of self to objects (e.g., “I feel unable to tell anyone all about myself”). Items were scored 1 = False, 0 = True. Higher summed scores reflect greater ego strength. Kelly and Daughtry (2018) report acceptable reliability (e.g., $\alpha = .78$). Convergent validity of the Es18 with a longer version of the scale and discriminant validity with sociodemographics were reported (Kelly & Daughtry, 2018).

Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996). The SCC is a 12-item self-report measure (5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) assessing the clarity, consistency, and stability of self-beliefs (e.g., “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”). The instrument is scored such that higher values indicate less self-concept clarity. The SCC has acceptable reliability (e.g., $\alpha = .85$) and construct validity across samples (Campbell et al., 1996).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES is a widely used 10-item measure of global self-esteem (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”). Items are rated using a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The RSES has demonstrated strong internal consistency (e.g., $\alpha = .83 - .90$), structural validity, and cross-cultural generalizability across numerous samples (Donnellan et al., 2016; McKay et al., 2014; Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

Procedure

Participants accessed a secure online survey via a study link undergraduate students in social science classes. After providing informed consent, participants completed demographics followed by the Es18, the SCC, and the RSES. Average completion time was approximately 10 minutes. Participants had to be at least 18 years old to participate.

Statistical Analyses

The design was cross-sectional. All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS (version 28). Where indicated, additional analyses were done using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022). Data was screened for missing responses, improbable response times (e.g., < 2 minutes), and response sets (e.g., identical responses to every item). No such cases were identified. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's α , skewness, and kurtosis were computed for each scale. Pearson correlations were used to estimate associations among Es18, SCC, and RSES. The hypothesized mediation was examined with ordinary least squares regression using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples to estimate the indirect effect and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. For the PROCESS analysis, the predictor was ES18 total scores, the mediator was SCC scores, and the criterion was RSES total scores. All models report unstandardized coefficients. All significant tests are two-tailed and interpreted at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, all participants provided informed consent, responses were anonymous, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

Data Screening and Descriptive Statistics

Data were first screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. No univariate outliers exceeded ± 3.29 SDs on any primary variable. No missing data was identified. All variables demonstrated acceptable skewness and kurtosis (< 1.0), supporting the use of parametric analyses.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics, internal consistency coefficients, and intercorrelations among all study variables. Internal consistency was acceptable for all measures.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, reliability, and intercorrelations

Variable	1	2	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
1. Ego strength			11.75	3.92	.796
2. Self-concept clarity	-.50*		32.67	9.62	.874
3. Self esteem	.36*	-.57*	28.84	6.82	.867

Note: $N = 106$. * $p < .001$. Lower self-concept clarity scores indicate more self-concept clarity.

Correlational Results

Pearson correlations among the three primary variables were all statistically significant (see Table 1). Higher ego strength was associated with more self-concept clarity and higher self-esteem. More self-concept clarity was also associated with higher self-esteem. These relationships were consistent with the proposed mediation model.

Mediation Analysis

Ego strength significantly predicted self-concept clarity, $B = -1.23$, $SE = 0.21$, $t = 5.92$, $p < .001$. Self-concept clarity, in turn, significantly predicted self-esteem while controlling for ego strength, $B = -0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 5.56$, $p < .001$. The total effect of ego strength on self-esteem was significant, $B = 0.63$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = 3.94$, $p < .001$. When self-concept clarity was included as a mediator, the direct effect of ego strength on self-esteem was no longer significant, $B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = 1.07$, $p = .286$. The indirect effect of ego strength on self-esteem via self-concept clarity was $B = 0.45$, $BootSE = 0.12$, 95% Bootstrapped CI [.232, .719]. Because the 95% confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant, indicating that self-concept clarity mediated the relationship. The full mediation model accounted for significant variance in self-esteem, $R^2 = .130$, $F = 15.50$, $p < .001$.

Supplementary Analyses

To check robustness, the mediation model was re-run controlling age and gender as covariates. None of the results changed meaningfully. Assumption checks indicated no major violations. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were below 1.34.

Discussion

The present study investigated the role of ego strength in the architecture of the self, testing whether self-concept clarity (SCC) mediates the relationship between ego strength and global self-esteem. Consistent with hypotheses, findings revealed significant positive associations between ego strength and both SCC and self-esteem. Mediation analyses further indicated that SCC fully mediated the relationship between ego strength and self-esteem. These results suggest that individuals with greater regulatory resources and durability of self-boundaries are more likely to possess coherent, internally consistent self-representations, which, in turn, support positive global self-evaluations. However, ego strength alone did not account for global self-esteem.

Integration with Theoretical Perspectives

The findings contribute meaningfully to the literature in several ways. First, they provide empirical support for the proposition that ego strength constitutes a foundational resource in the self-system. Historically, ego strength has been conceptualized within personality frameworks as a central capacity allowing individuals to maintain psychological equilibrium under stress, integrate conflicting self-motives, and regulate impulses effectively (Barron, 1953; Harmon, 1980). Recent findings have extended these constructs to ego resilience, self-regulation, and psychological resilience more broadly (Block & Block, 1980; Bonanno, 2004; Tugade et al., 2004).

The current study advances this literature by demonstrating that ego strength's influence extends not only to general adaptive functioning but also to structural aspects of self-representation, particularly self-concept clarity, which serves as a cognitive scaffold for evaluative self-appraisals.

SCC has long been recognized as a key structural feature of self-organization, defined as the degree to which self-beliefs are clearly defined, internally consistent, and maintain stability (Campbell et al., 1996). Higher SCC is consistently associated with more favorable self-evaluations, better psychological adjustment, and greater resilience to stressors (Campbell et al., 1996; Dutton & Brown, 1997; Xiang et al., 2023). By demonstrating that SCC mediates the ego strength-self-esteem relationship, these findings position SCC as a mechanism that translates regulatory resources into self-evaluative outcomes. The notion that a robust, coherent self-concept facilitates positive self-evaluation is consistent with cognitive-affective personality system theory, which highlights the interplay between stable personality structures and evaluative self-processes (Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Interestingly, the full mediation observed in the present study contrasts with the hypothesized expectation of a partial mediation, suggesting that the effect of ego strength on self-esteem may operate primarily via its influence on the clarity and coherence of the self-concept. This finding is consistent with self-system models that posit structural self-properties as critical conduits through which personality traits and regulatory capacities influence evaluative outcomes (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007; McAdams & Olson, 2010). In essence, ego strength may enable the formation and maintenance of coherent self-representations, which then act as the immediate cognitive substrate for self-esteem.

Another notable contribution of the current study is the integration of self-strengths with cognitive and self-process frameworks. This bridges a longstanding divide between comprehensive personality theories and contemporary individual differences approaches, demonstrating that constructs describing internal regulatory capacity can be meaningfully integrated with measures of cognitive self-organization and evaluative self-appraisal.

Practical Implications

These findings carry implications for both applied psychology and intervention design. If ego strength fosters clearer self-representations that, in turn, promote self-esteem, then interventions targeting regulatory capacities may have cascading effects on self-concept coherence and global self-evaluation. Evidence from resilience research suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing emotion regulation, stress coping, and mindfulness can improve psychological functioning and may indirectly bolster SCC and self-esteem (Ciarrochi et al., 2006; Werner, 1992). For instance, mindfulness-based programs promote self-reflection, emotional balance, and attentional control, potentially strengthening ego-related resources while simultaneously enhancing the clarity and stability of self-concepts (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Similarly, cognitive-behavioral approaches emphasizing self-monitoring and adaptive coping may fortify ego strength, providing a foundation for more coherent and stable self-representations, which in turn support self-esteem.

The current findings also highlight potential developmental implications. During adolescence and early adulthood, individuals experience ongoing identity formation, role exploration, and increasing exposure to social evaluation. In this developmental context, ego strength may function

as a protective factor, helping individuals maintain coherent self-representations amidst the challenges of identity consolidation (Schulenberg et al., 1997). Strengthening regulatory capacities in educational settings could thus promote not only immediate adaptive functioning but also long-term identity stability and self-evaluative confidence.

Alignment with Broader Theories of Personality and Self

The observed relationships align with broader personality and developmental theories. The social investment principle (Roberts et al., 2005) posits that engagement in structured social roles shapes personality traits and capacities, which subsequently influence well-being. From this perspective, ego strength may facilitate effective social investment by stabilizing self-representations and enabling consistent behavior across social contexts, thereby promoting SCC and supporting self-esteem. Likewise, self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of internal coherence, autonomy, and relatedness for psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Individuals with higher ego strength may be better positioned to pursue goals that align with their authentic self-concept, further reinforcing coherent self-structures and positive self-evaluations.

Methodological Considerations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, because of the cross-sectional design no causation can be determined. While the mediation model is theoretically consistent with a directional pathway from ego strength to SCC to self-esteem, longitudinal or experimental designs are required to establish temporal precedence and rule out alternative explanations or reverse causation. Second, the sample comprised undergraduate students, limiting generalizability to older adults, culturally diverse populations, or clinical groups. Future research could test the model across the lifespan, in cross-cultural contexts, and in clinical populations characterized by low regulatory capacity or fragmented self-concepts (e.g., borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorders). Third, reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of self-enhancing biases and shared method variance. Multi-method approaches incorporating behavioral, physiological, or informant assessments of regulatory capacity, coherence, and self-esteem would strengthen construct validity and mitigate bias (Vazire, 2006).

Further research could also investigate moderators of the mediation pathway. For example, exposure to stress, personality traits such as neuroticism or conscientiousness, and levels of social support may amplify or attenuate the influence of ego strength on SCC and self-esteem. Likewise, situational demands may determine the degree to which regulatory resources preserve self-concept coherence; under extreme stress, high ego strength may buffer against fragmentation, whereas under low-stress conditions, its influence may be less pronounced. The inclusion of additional variables, such as self-growth tendencies (e.g., Bai, 2015), emotion regulation strategies, coping styles, and trait affectivity, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the processes linking ego strength to evaluative self-appraisals.

Moreover, neurobiological and psychophysiological perspectives could inform the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Research suggests that individual differences in self-regulation are associated with neural networks implicated in executive control, emotion regulation, and self-referential processing (Kross et al., 2009; Heatherton, 2011). Integrating

measures of ego strength with neurocognitive indices of self-regulation may clarify the biological substrates that support coherent self-structure and positive self-evaluation. Similarly, longitudinal studies incorporating stress exposure, neuroticism, or emotional lability as moderators could illuminate the boundary conditions under which ego strength exerts its protective effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence that ego strength supports global self-esteem via self-concept clarity, highlighting the central role of coherent self-structure as a mechanism linking internal regulatory capacities to self-evaluative outcomes. These findings advance understanding of how constructs from classical personality theories can be empirically integrated with contemporary individual differences models. By demonstrating that SCC fully mediates the relationship between ego strength and self-esteem, this study notes the importance of considering regulatory traits and intermediate cognitive structures in understanding the architecture of the self. Future research should extend these findings using longitudinal, multi-method, and cross-cultural designs to establish causal pathways, boundary conditions, and developmental trajectories.

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